All Quiet on the Prison Front

[Bob Waxler, Professor of English, created a program called Changing Lives Through Literature. People, who otherwise may be sentenced to jail, are allowed to take a course in course in literature as an alternative sentence. Bob created a website in which people comment upon his program. He asked me to write a commentary. I am enclosing this commentary because it briefly addresses my view of America’s role in the role, my philosophy of education and how I feel about criminology, which is a major focus within this department.]

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by Yale Magrass

Changing Lives Through Literature may be one of the best rehabilitation programs ever conceived. However, the goal of rehabilitation is to help someone adjust to society, and indeed, once someone has engaged in violent crime they need to be brought to recognize how self-destructive that is. Implicitly, in rehabilitation, the question “is this a society to which you should adjust?” is seldom raised. Society becomes the standard to which the
individual must conform. Nevertheless, if someone is to turn away from violence, he (males in particular) must understand the forces which drew him to it.

The United States may present itself as peace-loving democracy, but it is actually a militaristic empire, conceived in slavery and genocide, with a long history of atrocities against many peoples, including Native Americans, Africans, Mexicans, Filipinos, Native Hawaiians, Japanese, Vietnamese and Iraqis. Whether violence is innate within human nature or contradictory to it, the people who orchestrate such a society need to produce cannon fodder, ready to kill and die at their command.

The military and prisons draw from similar populations. Judges sometimes offered enlisting in the army as an alternative sentence to jail. I propose including All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque, often acclaimed as the greatest novel ever written about war, in the repertoire of Changing Lives Through Literature.

Although it is about life in the German trenches during World War I, the horrors it depicts are typical of virtually all wars, fought by almost all countries, including the American invasion of Iraq. It tells how boys growing up in Germany were raised to think of war as something glorious, adventurous and fun, only to endure trauma, more brutal than nearly any prison, with a much lower chance of being released alive, for a cause which no one understood. It suggests the typical French or British soldier was no different than the average German, with whom they might have been friends had they met somewhere other than the battlefield. The front line soldiers of warring countries may have far more in common with each other than with their respective officers, who, in sending them to kill and die, could be their real enemies.
For the generation now filling the prisons, while growing up, killing bad guys in video games was among the most popular recreational activities.

Rulers, who need cannon fodder, do not want an education system that makes all students independent creative thinkers. Schools in the neighborhoods, where most soldiers and prisoners grow up, tend to emphasize drill and rote memorization. Rather than fostering intellectual curiosity, they transform learning into a tedious alienating experience. This may not be a failure, but fulfillment of its true purpose. They leave pupils angry and frustrated, but suggestible, because they have not developed the critical tools to understand the source of their discontent. For many of them, Changing Lives through Literature may be their first exposure to the possibility that learning can be something else. The No Child Left Behind Act mandates that schools turn over their student rosters to military recruiters. A school is deemed successful if it sends its products to the army as well as to college. The more repelled by learning a student is, the more open to the military recruiter he is likely to be.

Vague inarticulate discontent is volatile and can go in polar opposite directions. People, acclimated to violence, but without the necessary analytical or social skills to maintain a good job, may find themselves on the street, aimless, if they do not end up in the army. In some cases, the military may not even want them. They must redirect their aggression somewhere, perhaps against the society, which bred them for violence, and crime might be a likely alternative. The street gang might provide a source of social support and camaraderie. In the face of the terrors of the front line, the soldiers in All Quiet on the Western Front bonded with each other to point of being willing to sacrifice for their fellow pawns, even if they thought the cause for which they were sent to kill and die was a sham.

To end violent crime, we must first transform a society which uses violence as its means to assert domination. Changing Lives through Literature may provide very effective means to help victims, once the damage is done.

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Soc/Ant 420
Senior Seminar
Millennial Generation vs. Baby Boomers

A comparison between the present generation of college students and the one that came of age during the War in Vietnam; how each generation was molded by the technology, state of the economy, political conditions, school system and family relations of the time they grew up; each generation's values and culture, their beliefs about politics and government, war and peace, economic institutions, purpose of education, prospects for the future, family and sexual relations, how much power they believe have to affect their future, both individually and collectively, whether they see continuity between themselves and their parents or perceive a generation gap, levels of activism, the issues they focus on and consider important.

Soc 381
Social Impact of Science & Technology

It would almost impossible to deny that science and its close cousin, technology, are among the most powerful forces shaping modern social life. The word science itself means knowledge and indeed much of modern Western culture virtually equates science with truth. One of the founders of the scientific worldview, Francis Bacon proclaimed, "Knowledge is Power" and authority does seem to fall into the hands of those who can speak in science's name. The prestige of science may be reflected in the fact that people who investigate society refer to themselves as "social scientists." One of the questions we will address in this course is how applicable are the methods of the natural sciences to studying human society.

Closely related to science is technology. Almost all the conveniences of modern life can be attributed to technology, at least in part-- the fact that I have a word processor to write this course description, that we can conduct our class with minimal concern for the temperature or brightness outside, that we can come to class by cars and buses, and that we can expect to die at 80 rather than 30. However, this same technology has also scattered families and communities, displaced people, concentrated enormous control into relatively few hands, produced weapons of mass destruction, and may destroy the very natural environment upon which life depends. Surely, students who wish to understand the forces that govern contemporary society must understand the impact of science and technology.

Students whose primary interests lie in science and technology themselves have a similar need to consider the social, ethical, philosophical, and epistemological impact of their activities. The course provides students, from both arenas, with an understanding of the scientific and technological world-view, and allows students to reflect upon issues such as: value neutrality of tools, quantification of social and natural reality, the ownership of knowledge and information, knowledge as power, and technological development as progress.
Soc 305
Political Sociology

Who controls America’s institutions? From where do they receive their power? What are the powers and rights of ordinary citizens? How are political democracy and economic capitalism related? How are decisions about war and peace, welfare, social and economic policy made? How is wealth and power distributed in other countries? We continually illustrate with contemporary and historical such as the emergence of a global economy, what the media calls “terrorism,” environmental and energy policy, New Deal, Vietnam, Middle Eastern conflicts, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and maybe Iran or someplace else, the transformation of the Ex-Soviet Union, The European Union Europe, The “Patriot Act,” the post-Bush world, The recession of 2008 (depression?), the Tea Party, the Occupy Movement

Soc 200
Introduction to Social Thought

We all engage in abstract speculation at some time, if for no other than choosing our courses. Selecting courses requires a theory of the purpose of the university and demands of the long-term and short-term labor markets. In doing this, we create a model of the interrelationship of American institutions and how they affect personal life. Occasionally, all but a few of us address issues that little immediate relevance for our lives. Often, we become intrigued in the affairs of others, hoping at least unconsciously, they might shed light on our own problems. Sometimes, philosophical questions like the meaning of good and evil or the ultimate forces governing the universe have a practical intent. They offer us rules by which to conduct our lives.

It is in times of breakdown, when our normal ways of thinking no longer seem to hold that we review our most fundamental assumptions. The founders of sociology lived in such times. They were trying to understand the emergence of a new world; a world with a market economy, dominated by science and technology rather than one governed by religion and tradition. To appreciate the classical social theorists, we should be sensitive to the key issues of their times. This will require examining science and religion because our theorists’ ideas about these influenced their more general writings about society. Hobbes, Locke, Smith, Rousseau, De Tocqueville, De Maistre, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others were all addressing a similar problem, how to reorganize society to adjust to industrialization. The ways they addressed this question was however quite different. Studying how they faced such these issues may help to understand our own time. At the very least, it may provide models for structuring our thinking and asking the right questions.